

The Secret Chapter 2

Chapter 2

She was waiting on her doorstep.

Lady Judith had been given advance warning, of course. Two days before, her cousin Lucas had spotted the four Scottish warriors just a stone's throw away from the border crossing near Horton Ridge. Lucas hadn't been there by chance, he had been diligently following his aunt Millicent's instructions, and after nearly a month of twiddling his thumbs and daydreaming the early summer evenings away, he'd spotted the Scots. He'd been so surprised to see the full-blooded Highlanders, he almost forgot what he was supposed to do next. Memory quickly returned, however, and he rode at a dust-choking pace all the way to Lady Judith's remote holding to tell her she'd best prepare herself for the visitors.

There hadn't been much for Judith to do to ready herself. Since the day word had reached her through the intricate gossip vine that Frances Catherine was expecting, she'd had most of her baggage packed and all of her friend's gifts wrapped in pretty pink lace ribbons.

Frances Catherine's timing certainly could have been better. Judith had only just returned to her uncle Tekel's holding for her mandatory six-month visit when the message arrived. She couldn't pack up and go back to her aunt Millicent's and uncle Herbert's holding, for to do so would raise questions she wasn't about to answer, and so she hid her baggage and her gifts up in the loft of the stable and waited for her mother, who was home on one of her rare stopovers, to grow bored and leave again. Then she would broach the topic of her journey into Scotland with her guardian, Uncle Tekel.

Her mother's older brother was a soft-spoken, mild-mannered man, the complete opposite in temperament from his sister, Lady Cornelia, unless he was drinking. Then he'd turn as mean as a snake. Tekel had been an invalid for as many years as Judith could remember back, and in the early years he rarely lost his temper with her, even in the evenings when the pain in his misshapen legs became too much for him to endure. She'd know about his discomfort when he'd start rubbing his legs and ask one of the servants to fetch him a goblet of hot wine. From past experience, the servants had learned to bring along a full jug. Some nights Judith was able to sneak away to her own chamber before her uncle became abusive, but other nights he would demand that she sit by his side. He'd become quite melancholy and want to hold on to her hand while he talked about the past, when he'd been young and fit, a warrior to be reckoned with. An overturned cart had crushed his knees into grains of sand when he was but

twenty and two years in age, and once the wine dulled his pain and loosened his tongue, he would rail against the injustice of that freak accident.

He'd rail against Judith, too. She didn't let him know how much his anger upset her. A knot would form in her stomach and wouldn't go away until she was finally dismissed for the night.

Tekel's drinking got much worse over the years. He began to demand his wine earlier and earlier in the day, and with each gobletful he consumed, his disposition would change more and more dramatically. By nightfall he would either be weeping with self-loathing or screaming incoherent insults at Judith.

The following morning Tekel wouldn't remember anything he'd said the night before. Judith remembered every word. She desperately tried to forgive him his cruelty to her. She tried to believe that his pain was far more unbearable for him than it was for her. Uncle Tekel needed her understanding, her compassion.

Judith's mother, Lady Cornelia, didn't have any compassion for her brother. It was a blessing that she never stayed home more than a month at a time. She had very little to do with Tekel or her own daughter even then. When Judith was younger and more easily hurt by her mother's cold, distant attitude, her uncle would comfort her by telling her she was a constant reminder of her father, and her mother had so loved the baron that she still, after all these many years, mourned his passing. When she looked at her daughter, he said, the ache of her loss would well up inside her, leaving little room for other emotions. Because Tekel hadn't been drinking so heavily back then, Judith had no reason to doubt his explanation. She didn't understand such love between a husband and wife, though, and she ached inside for her mother's love and acceptance.

Judith had lived with her aunt Millicent and uncle Herbert the first four years of her life. Then, on her first real visit with her uncle Tekel and her mother, she accidentally referred to Uncle Herbert as her papa. Judith's mother went into a rage. Tekel wasn't overly pleased, either. He decided she needed to spend more time with him, and ordered Millicent to bring Judith to his holding for six months each year.

Tekel was repelled by the idea that his niece would consider Herbert her father. For that reason he set aside an hour each morning, when his mind wasn't muddled with wine, and tell her stories about her real father. The long curved sword that hung over the hearth was the very sword her father had used to slay the dragons who dared try to snatch England away from the rightful king, and her noble father had died protecting his overlord's life, Tekel would tell her.

The stories were endless... and filled with fancy. In no time at all Judith had sainted her father in her mind. She'd been told he died on the first day of May, and on the morning of each anniversary of his passing she'd collect a skirt full of early spring

flowers and cover her father's grave with the pretty blooms. She would say a prayer for his soul, though in truth she didn't believe her petition was necessary. Her papa was surely already in Heaven, pleasing his Maker now instead of the king he'd so valiantly pleased while on earth.

Judith was eleven years old and on her way to the border festival when she found out the truth about her father. He hadn't died defending England from infidels. The man wasn't even English. Her mother didn't mourn her husband; she hated him with a passion that hadn't dimmed at all through the years. Tekel had only told her one half-truth. Judith was a constant reminder to her mother, a reminder of the horrible mistake she'd made.

Aunt Millicent sat Judith down and told her everything she knew. Her mother had married the Scottish laird out of spite when the English baron she'd set her cap on was deemed unacceptable for her by her father and her king. Lady Cornelia wasn't accustomed to having her wants denied her. She married the Highlander a short two weeks after meeting him at court in London. Cornelia wanted to get even with her father. She wanted to hurt him, and she certainly accomplished that goal, but in the bargain she'd made, she hurt herself more.

The marriage lasted five years. Then Cornelia returned to England. She begged residence with her brother, Tekel, and at first refused to explain what had happened. Later, after it became apparent she was expecting a child, she told her brother that her husband had banished her as soon as he found out she was pregnant. He didn't want her any longer, and he didn't want her child.

Tekel wanted to believe his sister. He was lonely, and the thought of raising a niece or nephew appealed to him. After Judith was born, though, Cornelia couldn't stand having the infant in the keep. Millicent and Herbert were able to sway Tekel into letting them have Judith. The bargain they had to make was that they would never tell Judith about her father.

Millicent wasn't about to keep that promise, but she waited until she felt Judith was old enough to understand. Then she sat her down and explained everything she knew about her father.

Judith had a thousand questions. Millicent didn't have many answers. She wasn't even certain if the Scottish laird was still alive. She did know his name though. It was Maclean.

She'd never met the man and therefore couldn't offer a description of his appearance. Yet since Judith didn't look anything like her mother, she could only assume her blond hair and blue eyes came from her father's side of the family.

It was simply too much for Judith to take in. Her mind could only focus on all the lies she'd been told over the years. The betrayal was devastating to her.

Frances Catherine had been waiting for her at the festival. The minute the two friends were alone, Judith told her everything she'd learned. She wept, too. Frances Catherine held her hand and wept right along with her.

Neither one of them could understand the reasons behind the deceit. After days of discussing the topic, they decided the reasons weren't important now.

Then they formed their own plan. It was decided that Judith wouldn't confront her mother or her uncle Tekel with the truth. If they realized that Millicent had told her the truth about her father, they would very likely force her to permanently move in with them.

That real possibility was chilling. Aunt Millicent, Uncle Herbert, and Frances Catherine had become Judith's family. They were the only people she could trust, and she wouldn't allow her mother to keep her away from them.

No matter how difficult the task, Judith would have to hold on to her patience. She would wait until she was older. Then, if she were still inclined, she would find a way to go to these Highlands and meet the man who had fathered her. Frances Catherine promised to help.

The following years passed quickly, even for a young woman wishing to take on the world. Frances Catherine had been pledged to marry a border man from the Stewart clan, but three months before the wedding day the Kirkcaldys had a falling out with the Stewart laird. Patrick Maitland took full advantage of the fresh feud and offered for Frances Catherine a scant week after the contract to the Stewarts was broken.

When Judith heard that her friend had married a Highlander, she believed fate had taken a hand in helping her. She'd already given Frances Catherine her promise to come to her when she was expecting. While she was there, Judith thought, she would find a way to meet her father.

She would start her journey tomorrow. Frances Catherine's relatives were on their way to fetch her even now. The only problem was how to explain all this to Uncle Tekel.

At least her mother was back in London. The household was always in an uproar when Judith's mother was home, but she'd grown bored with the isolation of the country and had left for London the week before. Lady Cornelia loved the chaos and gossip of court life, the lax moral code, and most of all, the intrigue and secrecy that went along with the many liaisons. She currently had her eye on Baron Ritch, the handsome husband of one of her dearest friends, and had hatched a plan to get him into her bed within a fortnight. Judith had heard her mother make just that boast to Tekel and then laugh over his outraged reaction.

Nothing her mother did could surprise Judith. She was thankful she only had Tekel to contend with. She had waited until the night before her departure to tell him about her plans. She wasn't going to ask his permission, but she felt it would be dishonorable to simply leave without telling him where she was going.

She dreaded the confrontation. On the way up to his bedchamber, the familiar knot formed in the pit of her stomach. She said a prayer that the ale had made Tekel melancholy tonight and not god-awful mean.

The chamber was shrouded in darkness. A musty, damp odor permeated the air. Judith always felt as though she was being suffocated whenever she was inside the chamber. She felt that way now and took a deep breath to calm her nerves.

A single candle burned with light on the chest next to Tekel's bed. Judith could barely see her uncle's face in the shadows. The worry of fire from a forgotten candle was always a fear in the back of her mind, for often her uncle would pass into a drunken slumber before snuffing out the candle flame.

She called out to him. He didn't answer. Judith walked inside just as Tekel finally noticed her and called out to her.

His voice was slurred. He beckoned her forward with a wave of his hand, and after she'd hurried over to the side of the bed, he reached up to take hold of her hand.

He gave her a wobbly smile. She let out a sigh of relief. He was in a melancholy mood tonight.

"Sit beside me while I tell you a story I've just remembered about the time I rode into battle with your father. Did I tell you he used to sing the same ballad whenever the trumpets sounded the attack? He always kept right on singing the entire time he was fighting."

Judith sat down in the chair adjacent to the bed. "Uncle, before you continue this story, I would like to talk to you about an important matter."

"Hearing about your father isn't important?"

She ignored the question. "I have something I must tell you," she said.

"What is it?"

"Do you promise you'll try not to become angry?"

"When have I ever been angry with you?" he asked, completely unaware of the hundreds of nights he'd raged against her. "Now tell me what ails you, Judith. I'll smile all through this confession."

She nodded and folded her hands in her lap. "Each summer, your sister Millicent and her husband have taken me to the festival on the border. Uncle Herbert has relatives living there."

"I know he does," Tekel remarked. "Hand me my goblet and go on with this explanation. I'm wanting to know why you didn't tell me about these festivals."

Judith watched her uncle gulp down a large portion of his ale and pour himself another helping before she answered his question.

The pain in her stomach intensified. "Millicent thought it would be better if I didn't tell you or mother—she thought it would upset you to know I was associating with Scots."

"What you say is true," Tekel agreed. He took another long drink from his goblet. "I don't usually hold with such hatred, but I'll tell you your mother has good reason to feel the way she does. I can also understand why you kept quiet about attending these festivals, too. I know the fine time you must have had. I'm not so old I can't remember. Still, I must put a stop to it. You won't be going to the border again."

Judith took a deep breath in an effort to control her anger. "At the first festival I attended, I met a girl named Frances Catherine Kirkcaldy. She and I became good friends right away. Until Frances Catherine married and moved away from the border region, we renewed our friendship every summer at the festival. I gave her a promise, and now the time has come for me to keep it. I have to go away for a little while," she ended in a soft whisper.

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Her uncle stared at her with bloodshot eyes. It was apparent he was having difficulty following her explanation. "What's this?" he demanded. "Where do you think you're going?"

"First I would like to tell you about the promise I gave when I was eleven years old." She waited for his nod before continuing. "Frances Catherine's mother died during childbirth and her grandmother died in just the same way."

"That isn't so extraordinary," he muttered. "Many women die doing their duty."

She tried not to let his callous attitude bother her. "Several years ago, I learned from Frances Catherine that her grandmother actually died sometime during the week after the birthing, and that was very hopeful news, of course."

"Why was it hopeful?"

"Because her death couldn't have been caused by narrow hips."

Judith knew she was making a muck out of her explanation, but Tekel's scowl was distracting to her concentration.

Tekel shrugged. "It was still the birthing that did her in," he said. "And you shouldn't be concerning yourself with such intimate topics."

"Frances Catherine believes she's going to die," Judith said. "For that reason, I did concern myself."

"Get on with the telling about this promise," he ordered. "But pour me a bit more of that sweet ale while you're explaining."

Judith emptied the last of the ale from the second jug.

"Frances Catherine asked for my promise to come to her when she was expecting. She wanted me by her side when she died. It was little enough to ask, and I immediately agreed. I made that promise a long time ago, but each summer I've told her I haven't changed my mind. I don't want my friend to die," she added. "And for that reason, I took it upon myself to learn as much as I could about the newest birthing methods. I've devoted a good deal of time to this project. Aunt Millicent was a wonderful help. Over the past two years, she has found quite a number of reputable midwives for me to interview."

Tekel was appalled by Judith's admissions. "Do you see yourself as this woman's savior? If God's wanting your friend, your interference could put a sin on your soul. You're a bit of nothing, you are, and yet you dare to think yourself important enough to make a difference?" he added in a sneer.

Judith refused to argue with him. She'd grown so accustomed to his insults, they barely stung anymore. She was proud of that accomplishment, but wished she could find a way to stop the ache in her stomach. She closed her eyes, took another deep breath, and then plunged ahead. "Frances Catherine's time is drawing near and her relatives are on their way to fetch me. I'll be perfectly safe. I'm certain there will be at least two women to accompany me and a fair number of men to see to my safety."

Tekel's head fell back on the pillows. "Good God, you're asking me if you can go back to the border? And what am I to tell your mother when she returns and finds you missing?"

Judith hadn't asked his permission, but decided not to point that out to him. Her uncle closed his eyes. He looked like he was hovering on the edge of sleep. She knew she was going to have to hurry if she wanted to get the rest said before he passed into a drunken slumber.

"I'm not going to the border region," she began. "I'm going to a place called the Highlands, way up north, in an isolated area near the Moray Firth."

Her uncle's eyelids flew open. "I won't hear of it," he roared.

"Uncle—"

He reached out to slap her. Judith had already moved her chair out of his striking distance.

"I'm through discussing this," he roared. He was so upset, the veins in the side of his neck stood out.

Judith braced herself against his anger. "But I'm not through talking about this," she insisted.

Tekel was stunned. Judith had always been such a quiet, shy child. She'd never argued with him before. What had come over her? "Has Millicent been putting fancy ideas into your head?" he demanded.

"I know about my father."

He squinted at her a long minute before reaching for his ale. Judith noticed his hand shook.

"Of course you know about your father. I've told you all about the wonderful baron. He was—"

"His name is Maclean and he lives somewhere in the Highlands. He isn't an English baron. He's a Scottish laird."

"Who told you this nonsense?"

"Aunt Millicent told me a long time ago."

"It's a lie," he screamed. "Why would you listen to Millicent. My sister—"

"If it isn't true, why do you object to my going to the Highlands?"

He was too muddleheaded from the ale to think of a convincing answer. "You're not going and that's the end of it. Do you hear me?"

"The Devil himself won't keep me from going to Frances Catherine," she countered in a calm voice.

"If you leave, you won't be welcomed back here."

She nodded. "Then I won't come back here."

"You thankless bitch," he shouted. "I tried to do right by you. The stories I made up about your father..."

He didn't go on. Judith shook her head. "Why did you make up those stories?" she asked.

"I wanted to give you something to hold on to, especially since your mother couldn't stomach the sight of you. You knew that. I pitied you and tried to make it a bit better for you."

Judith's stomach coiled and tightened so intensely now that she almost doubled over. The room seemed to be closing in on her. "I heard mother say that Uncle Herbert was inferior because he had tainted blood running through his veins. She feels the same way about me, doesn't she?"

"I don't have any easy answers," he replied. He sounded weary, defeated. "I could only try to soften her influence over you."

"The sword hanging over the hearth... who does that really belong to?" she asked.

"It's mine."

"And the ruby ring I wear on this chain around my neck?" she asked. She lifted the ring from its resting place between her breasts. "Is this yours, too?"

He snorted. "The ring belongs to the bastard Maclean. The intricate design around the stone holds some meaning to the family. Your mother took it with her when she left just to spite him."

Judith let go of her death grip on the ring. "What about the grave?"

"It's empty."

She didn't have any more questions. She sat there another minute or two, with her hands fisted in her lap. When she next looked at her uncle, he was sound asleep. Within seconds he was snoring. She took the empty goblet out of his hand, removed his tray from the other side of the bed, blew out the candle flame, and then left the room.

She suddenly knew what she wanted to do. She could destroy one lie.

The sun was just setting when she ran across the drawbridge and climbed the hill to the cemetery. She didn't slow down until she reached the empty grave. She kicked the wilted flowers away, then reached for the ornately carved headstone at the top of the mound. It took her a long while to tear the headstone out of the hard ground, longer still to destroy it completely.

The following morning she was ready to leave. She didn't return to her uncle's chamber to tell him good-bye.

All of the servants rushed around her, fighting for a chance to help. Judith hadn't realized until now that their loyalty belonged to her far more than to her uncle. She was humbled by their united show of support. Paul, the stable master, had already prepared the swaybacked pack mare with the baggages she would be taking with her. He was saddling her favorite steed, a speckle-legged mare named Glory, when Jane came rushing outside with another satchel full of food she promised would last the length of the journey. From the weight of the baggage and the way Jane was

struggling to carry it to the stables, Judith concluded there was enough food packed inside to feed an army.

Samuel, the watch guard, shouted the arrival of the Scottish party. The drawbridge was immediately lowered. Judith stood on the top step of the keep, her hands at her sides, a smile of greeting on her face, forced though it was, for she was suddenly feeling extremely nervous.

When the warriors reached the wooden planks of the drawbridge and their horses thundered across, her smile faltered.

A shiver of worry passed down her spine. There weren't any women in the group. There were only warriors, four in all, and they looked like giant barbarians to her. Her worry moved into her stomach as soon as they rode closer and she got a good look at their faces. Not one of them was smiling. God's truth, they looked downright hostile to her.

They were all dressed in their hunting plaids. Each clan, Judith knew, used two separate plaids. The muted colors of gold, brown, and green were preferred for hunting wild game... or men, for those colors blended into the forest more easily and hid them from their prey. The more colorful plaids were used for all other occasions.

Their bare knees didn't take Judith by surprise. She was used to their unusual dress, as all the men who attended the border games wore their knee-length plaids. She could even identify some of the clans by their colors. In England, a baron's banner carried his colors, but in Scotland, as Frances Catherine had explained, the laird and his followers were recognized by the colors of their dress.

What did surprise Judith was their angry expressions. She couldn't understand why they were so obviously cranky. Then she decided the journey must have made the men weary. It was a paltry excuse, but it was the best she could come up with.

None of the warriors dismounted when they reached her. Three of them formed a line behind the man she assumed was their leader. No one said a word for a long, long while. They all rudely stared at her. She couldn't stop herself from rudely staring back, though her attention was centered solely on their leader. She didn't think she'd ever seen such a magnificent sight in all her life. The man fascinated her. He was certainly the biggest of the lot. His broad shoulders fairly blocked out the sun shining down behind him, and only rays of light surrounded him, giving him an invincible, magical appearance.

He wasn't magical, though. He was only a man, a ruggedly handsome man at that, and surely the most muscular warrior in the group. The plaid he wore had opened on the side of his left thigh. The bulge of sleek muscle there looked as hard as roped steel. Since it wasn't proper for her to stare at such a private area, she turned her gaze back

to his face. His expression didn't indicate he'd noticed her taking a little peek at his thigh, and she let out a sigh over that blessing.

Lord, she thought, she could be content to stare at the warlord for the rest of the day. His hair was a dark, rich brown in color, with just a little hint of curl to it. His bare arms were as bronzed as his face. He had a striking profile. Oh yes, he was a fit one all right, but in truth it was the color of his eyes that held her interest the longest. They were a beautiful, brilliant shade of gray.

The warrior's stare was intense, unnerving. There was such an aura of power radiating from him, it almost took her breath away. The intensity in the way he was staring at her made her want to blush, but she couldn't imagine why. Dear God, she hoped this one wasn't Frances Catherine's husband. He seemed to be a terribly rigid man, controlled too. Judith didn't think he was a man given to much laughter.

Yet there was definitely something about him that pulled at her heart, something that made her want to reach out to him. It was an odd reaction to the Scotsman, yet certainly no more odd than the fact that the longer she stared up at him, the more her worry dissipated.

She was going to have a wonderful adventure. That realization popped into her mind all of the sudden. It didn't make any sense to her, but she was too confused by her reaction to the warrior to try to sort it out now. She only knew that she was suddenly feeling completely free of all her worries. Safe, too. The look on the warlord's face indicated he had little liking for the duty he'd undertaken, but she was certain he'd protect her on this journey to his home.

She didn't even care that there weren't any ladies riding escort for decency's sake. Hang convention. She couldn't wait to get started. She was going to leave the lies, the hurt, the rejection, all the betrayals behind her. She made a promise to herself then and there. She would never come back here. Never. She wouldn't even agree to a visit, no matter how brief. She would stay with her aunt Millicent and Uncle Herbert, and by God, if she wished, she would call them Mother and Father, too, and no one was going to stop her.

Judith felt an almost overwhelming urge to shout with laughter just to give sound to the happiness she was feeling. She suppressed that desire, knowing full well the Scots wouldn't understand. How could they? She barely understood herself.

It seemed the silence had gone on for hours, yet she knew only a few minutes had actually passed. Then Paul pushed open the stable doors. The noise of the old hinges squeaking and groaning for fresh oil drew the warriors' immediate attention. All but the leader turned to look in that direction. Two, Judith noticed, reached for their swords. It dawned on her then that the warriors considered themselves to be in hostile territory and would naturally be on their guard against attack.

No wonder they were all so cranky. Their frowns made good sense to her now. Judith turned her attention back to the leader. "Are you Frances Catherine's husband?"

He didn't answer her. She was about to repeat her question in Gaelic when the warrior directly behind the leader spoke up. "Patrick's with his wife. We're his relatives."

There was such a burr in his voice, she had difficulty understanding him. The warrior nudged his mount forward. When he reached his leader's side, he spoke again. "Are you Lady Judith Elizabeth?"

She smiled. No one but Frances Catherine ever added Elizabeth to her name. It was a sweet reminder to her of days gone by. "I am," she answered. "Though you may call me Judith. Please tell me, sir. How is Frances Catherine?"

"Fat."

She laughed at his curt reply. "She's supposed to be fat," she said. "But she's also feeling well?"

He nodded. "Madam, we've come a long way to hear you tell us you won't come back with us. Kindly give us your refusal now and we'll be on our way."

Her eyes widened in surprise. The one who had so casually insulted her had dark auburn-colored hair and pleasing green eyes.

She turned to look at the others. "Do you all believe I won't go back with you?" she asked, her voice incredulous.

Every single one of them nodded.

She was astonished. "You came all this way just to hear me tell you no?"

They all nodded in unison again. Judith couldn't contain her amusement. She burst into laughter.

"Do you laugh at our Frances Catherine because she innocently believed you would keep your word?" one of the warriors asked.

"Nay, sir," she blurted out. "I'm laughing at you."

She decided she shouldn't have been so honest with the Scot. He was looking like he wanted to throttle her now.

She forced herself to quit smiling. "I do apologize if I've offended you, sir," she said. "I was laughing at you, but only just a little. Your comments, you see, took me by surprise."

He didn't look placated by her apology.

Judith let out a little sigh over the sorry beginning of the conversation and decided to start over. "What is your name, sir?"

"Alex."

"I'm pleased to meet you, Alex," she announced with a quick curtsy.

He rolled his eyes heavenward in exasperation. "Madam, you're wasting our time," Alex returned. "If you'll only give us your refusal, we'll take our leave. You don't have to go into your reasons for declining. A simple no will suffice."

They immediately all nodded again. She thought she might strangle on her laughter.

"I'm afraid I won't be able to give you what you're so obviously hoping for," she began. "I have every intention of keeping my word to my friend. I'm most anxious to see Frances Catherine again. The sooner we leave, the better, to my way of thinking. I will of course understand if you would like to refresh yourselves before we depart."

She had astonished them with that little speech, she decided. Alex looked stunned. The others, save for the leader, who still hadn't shown any outward reaction at all, looked only mildly ill. Judith didn't laugh, but she did smile. She'd deliberately spoken in Gaelic, too, just to impress them, and from the way they were staring at her, she assumed she'd accomplished that goal.

Judith decided she must be certain to remember every one of their expressions so she could recount every single detail of this initial meeting to Frances Catherine. Her friend would surely find this just as amusing as she did.

"You really mean to come with us, lass?" Alex asked.

Hadn't she just said as much? Judith hid her exasperation. "Yes, I really do mean to come with you," she answered in a forceful, no nonsense tone of voice. She turned her gaze to the leader again. "You had better understand that it doesn't matter if you want my company or not. Nothing's going to stop me from keeping my promise. If I have to walk to Frances Catherine's home, then by all that's holy, I will. Now then," she added in a much softer voice. "Have I made myself clear enough for you?"

The leader neither nodded nor spoke, but he did raise one eyebrow. Judith decided to take that reaction as a yes.

Paul drew her attention with a long whistle. She motioned for him to bring out the horses. She lifted the hem of her blue gown and hurried down the steps. She was just passing the line of warriors when she heard one mutter, "I can already tell she's going to be difficult, Iain."

She didn't even pretend she hadn't heard that remark.

"Tis the truth I probably will be difficult," she called out as she continued on toward the stables. Her laughter trailed behind her.

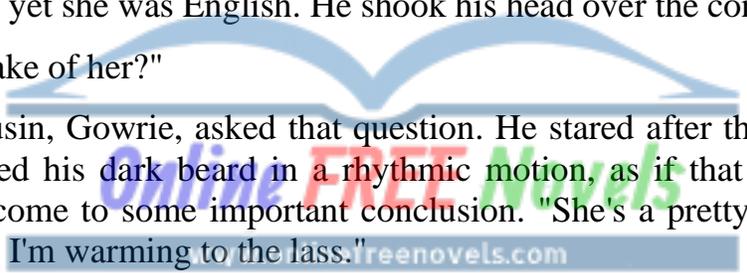
Because she didn't turn around, she didn't catch their smiles over her boast.

Iain couldn't seem to take his gaze off the woman. He was certainly astonished she meant to keep her word, of course, but damn it all, he hadn't expected to be attracted to the woman. It took him by surprise, this appalling response, and he wasn't at all certain what he could do about it.

Her long wheat-colored hair was lifted by the breeze as she hurried over to the stable master. Iain couldn't help but notice... and appreciate the gentle sway of her hips. There was such grace in her every movement. Aye, she was beautiful, all right. Her eyes were the prettiest violet he'd ever seen, but it was the wonderful sound of her laughter that had truly affected him. It was filled with such joy.

Iain had already made the decision to force the woman to come home with him, a decision he hadn't shared with his companions. When the time came, they would do what he ordered. Lady Judith had certainly surprised him, though. She was a woman of her word. And yet she was English. He shook his head over the contradiction.

"What do you make of her?"

Iain's second cousin, Gowrie, asked that question. He stared after the Englishwoman while he scratched his dark beard in a rhythmic motion, as if that repetitive action might help him come to some important conclusion. "She's a pretty little thing, isn't she? I'm thinking I'm warming to the lass." 

"I'm thinking you talk too much," Alex muttered. "Hell, Gowrie, you warm to anything wearing a skirt."

Gowrie smiled. He wasn't the least offended by his friend's insulting remarks. "She's keeping her word to our Frances Catherine," he said. "And that's the only reason I'd ever warm to an Englishwoman."

Iain had heard enough of the idle chatter. He was in a hurry to get started. "Let's get the hell out of here," he ordered. "I can't breathe when I'm in England."

The other warriors were in full agreement. Iain turned in his saddle to look at Brodick. "She'll ride with you," he said. "Tie her satchel behind your saddle."

The blond-haired warrior shook his head. "You ask too much, Iain."

"I'm not asking," Iain countered, his voice as hard as sleet. "I'm giving you an order. Now try telling me no."

Brodick backed away from the threat. "Hell," he muttered. "As you wish."

"She can ride with me," Gowrie suggested. "I won't mind."

Iain turned to glare at the soldier. "Aye, you won't mind. You aren't touching her, either, Gowrie. Not now, not ever. Understand me?"

He didn't wait for Gowrie's agreement, but turned his gaze back to Brodick. "Move," he commanded.

Judith had just mounted her steed when the warrior reached her side. "You're riding with me," he announced. He paused when he saw the number of baggages tied on the mount's back. Then he shook his head. "You'll have to leave—"

He never got to finish his explanation. "Thank you so much for offering, sir, but there really isn't any need for me to ride with you. My mare's quite strong. She's certainly fit enough for this journey."

Brodick wasn't accustomed to being contradicted by a woman. He didn't know how to proceed. He started to reach for her, then stopped in mid action.

Iain noticed the soldier's hesitation. Then Brodick turned to look at him and he saw the confusion in his expression.

"She's being difficult," Alex muttered.

"Aye, she is," Gowrie agreed with a chuckle. "I was wrong, Alex. She isn't pretty. She's damn beautiful." Alex nodded. "Aye, she is," he admitted.

"Will you look at Brodick?" Gowrie said then. "If I didn't know better, I'd guess he was about to swoon."

Alex found that remark vastly amusing. Iain shook his head and nudged his mount forward. Judith hadn't noticed Brodick's discomfort. She was occupied smoothing her skirts over her ankles. She adjusted the heavy cloak over her shoulders, tied the black cord into a bow, and finally reached for the reins Paul was patiently holding for her.

Iain motioned Brodick out of the way, then edged his mount closer to Judith's side. "You may take only one bag with you, lass."

His voice didn't suggest she argue with him. "I'm taking every one of them," she countered. "Most are presents I've made for Frances Catherine and the baby, and I'm not about to leave them behind."

She thought she was acting very courageously, considering the fact that the huge warrior was trying to glare her soul right out of her body. It was apparent he liked getting his own way. She took a quick breath, then added, "I don't wish to ride with that young man, either. My horse will carry me just as well."

He didn't say anything for a long minute. She was matching him frown for frown, too, until he pulled out his sword from the sheath at his side. She let out a little gasp then. Before she could move out of his path, he'd raised the sword, shifted his position in his saddle, and then used the blade to slice through the ropes holding her precious baggage.

Her heart was pounding inside her chest. She calmed down when he put his sword away. He motioned for his friends to come forward, and then ordered them to each take one of her satchels. Judith didn't say a word while the disgruntled-looking soldiers secured her baggage behind their saddles, but she let out another startled gasp when the leader tried to snatch her out of her saddle. She slapped his hands away.

It was a puny defense against such a big man, and it was obvious to her that he was vastly amused by her action, too. The sparkle in his eyes said as much. "It will be a hard ride up the mountains, lass, and it would serve you better if you rode with one of us."

She shook her head. The idea of being so close to the handsome man wasn't actually displeasing, but she didn't want him to think of her as inferior. She'd had enough of that in the past to last her a lifetime.

"I'm very fit for this journey," she boasted. "You needn't worry about me keeping up."

Iain held his exasperation. "There will also be times when we'll have to ride through hostile territory," he patiently explained. "Our mounts are trained to be quiet—"

"My horse will be just as quiet," she interjected.

He suddenly smiled at her. "Will she be as quiet as you are?"

She immediately nodded.

He let out a sigh. "I suspected as much."

She didn't realize he'd given her an insult until he reached for her again. He didn't give her time to push his hands away, either. The man was determined, all right. He wasn't overly gentle when he lifted her from her saddle and settled her on his lap. He hadn't considered the indecency of the position. Her legs straddled his saddle in just the same way a man's would when he was riding, and if that wasn't an embarrassment, the fact that the backs of her thighs were plastered on top of his certainly was. She could feel her face turning pink with a blush.

He wouldn't let her correct the shameful position. His left arm was tightly wrapped around her waist. She couldn't move at all, but she could breathe, and she guessed that would have to be enough. Judith waved farewell to the servants watching the spectacle.

She was a little irritated with the warrior for using such high-handed tactics to get his way. She still noticed how warm she was feeling in his arms, though. She noticed his scent, too, and found the faint masculine aroma extremely pleasing.

Judith leaned back against his chest. The top of her head was just below his chin. She didn't try to look up at him when she asked him to give her his name.

"Iain."

She bumped his chin when she nodded to let him know she'd heard his gruffly whispered reply. "How are you related to Frances Catherine?"

"Her husband is my brother."

They'd crossed the drawbridge now and were climbing the hill adjacent to the family cemetery. "And his name is Patrick?"

"Yes."

It was apparent he wasn't in the mood to talk. Judith pulled away from him and turned to look at him. He was staring straight ahead, ignoring her. "I've only one more question to ask you, Iain," she said. "Then I promise to leave you to your thoughts."

He finally looked down at her. Judith's breath caught in her throat. Dear Lord, he had beautiful eyes. It was a mistake, asking him to give her his full attention, she decided, because his penetrating gaze robbed her of her concentration.

It was perfectly safe to find him attractive, she decided. Nothing could ever come of it, of course. She was going to his home, yes, but she was going to be an outsider, a guest. Once there, he probably wouldn't have anything to do with her, or she with him.

Besides, she was English. No, nothing could ever come from this harmless attraction.

"Are you married?" She'd blurted out that question.

She seemed more surprised than he was.

"No, I'm not married."

She smiled.

He didn't know what to make of that. She'd asked her question and now he could ignore her. The problem, unfortunately, was that he couldn't take his gaze off her.

"I've one more question to ask you," she whispered. "Then I'll leave you to your thoughts."

They stared into each other's eyes a long minute. "What is this question you wish to ask me?"

His voice was whisper soft. It felt like a caress to her. That reaction confused her and she had to take her gaze away from the handsome devil so she could sort out this bizarre reaction.

He noticed her hesitation. "This question of yours must not be very important."

"Oh, it is important," she countered. She paused another minute while she tried to remember what the question was. She stared at his chin so she could concentrate. "Now I remember," she announced with a smile. "Is Patrick kind to Frances Catherine? Does he treat her well?"

"I imagine he's kind to her," he answered with a shrug. Almost as an afterthought he added, "He would never beat her."

She looked up into his eyes so he could see her amusement over that comment. "I already knew he wouldn't beat her."

"How would you know?"

"If he ever raised a hand against her, she'd run away from him."

It was such an outrageous thing to say, Iain didn't know how to respond. He quickly regained his wits. "And where would she run?"

"To me."

Since she'd sounded so sincere, he knew she believed what she'd just told him. Iain had never heard of anything so preposterous. A wife simply did not leave her husband, no matter what the reason.

"None of the Maitlands would ever touch a woman in anger."

"Iain, what do you make of this?"

Alex shouted that question, interrupting their discussion. Judith turned just in time to see the warrior motion to the grave she'd destroyed the evening before. She immediately turned her gaze to the line of trees at the top of the ridge. Iain felt her tense in his arms. "Do you know who did this?"

"Yes," she answered, her voice whisper soft.

"Who does the grave—"

She didn't let him finish. "It was my father's grave."

They'd reached Alex's side when she made that remark. The green-eyed warrior glanced over at Iain, then back to Judith. "Would you like us to put the headstone back before we go, lass?"

She shook her head. "I'd only have to knock it down again if you did, but I do thank you for offering."

Alex couldn't hide his astonishment. "Are you telling us you did this?"

There wasn't a hint of embarrassment on her face when she answered him. "Yes, I did this. It took me a good hour. The ground was as hard as rock."

The Scot looked appalled. Then Iain drew her attention. He nudged her face up to his with the back of his thumb. "Why would you do such a thing?"

She lifted her shoulders in a dainty shrug. "It seemed appropriate at the time."

He shook his head. The atrocity she'd just admitted to seemed completely out of character with what he'd already surmised about her. He'd guessed she was a sweet-tempered, innocent woman. Stubborn, too. The way she'd argued over riding her own mount indicated that flaw. Still, she didn't seem the type of woman who would desecrate holy ground.

"This is your father's grave?" he asked again, determined to get to the bottom of this intriguing puzzle.

"Yes," she answered. She let out a little sigh. "You needn't be concerned about this. The grave's empty."

"Empty."

"Yes."



She wasn't going to explain further. He decided not to prod. She'd gone completely rigid in his arms. It was obvious the topic was distressing to her.

Iain motioned for Alex to take the lead again, then nudged his mount into line behind him. Once the cemetery was well behind them, Judith visibly relaxed.

They didn't speak again until the sun was setting and it was time to make camp for the night. They'd ridden long hours. The men were in a much more jovial mood now that they'd crossed the border and were once again back in Scotland.

Judith was exhausted by the time they finally stopped. Iain noticed when he helped her dismount. She could barely stand up on her own. His hands spanned her waist to hold her steady until she regained the strength in her legs.

He could feel her trembling. He stared at the top of her head while she stared at the ground. Since she didn't mention her obvious problem, he didn't, either. She was holding on to his arms, but as soon as she let go, he released his grip on her waist.

He immediately turned to his stallion. She slowly made her way around his horse and continued on toward the stream she'd glimpsed halfway hidden behind the line of trees

adjacent to the small clearing. Iain watched her walk away and was again struck by her regal bearing. She moved like a princess, he thought to himself.

Lord, she really was a beauty. Damn innocent, too. The way she blushed over every little thing was telling. She was enchanting, too.

This one could get to his heart. Iain was so stunned by that sudden realization, he almost blanched. He continued to stare at the trees where Judith had disappeared, but he was frowning now.

"What's got you so riled?" Alex asked from behind.

Iain rested his arm on the saddle of his mount. "Foolish thoughts," he replied.

His friend glanced over to the trees where Judith had gone, then turned back to Iain. "Foolish thoughts about a beautiful Englishwoman, perchance?" Iain shrugged. "Perhaps," he allowed. Alex knew better than to pursue the topic. His laird didn't look at all happy over his confession. "It's going to be a long journey home," he predicted with a sigh before turning back to take care of his own steed.

Judith had been able to maintain her dignified walk until she was safely hidden by the trees. Then she all but doubled over and grabbed hold of her lower back. Lord, she ached. Her backside and thighs felt as though someone had taken a whip to her.

She walked around in circles until she'd worked the stiffness out of her legs. Then she washed her face and hands in the cold water. She felt better, hungry too. She hurried back to the clearing. She could hear the men talking, but as soon as she came into their view, they all closed their mouths.

Iain, she quickly noticed, wasn't there. She felt a moment of pure panic. It made her stomach lurch, so quickly did the feeling come upon her. Then she spotted his stallion. The fear immediately eased. The Scottish warrior might very well leave her, but he'd never leave his faithful steed, would he?

She was alone in the forest with four men who were virtual strangers to her. If word of this circumstance ever reached anyone in England, her reputation would be tattered. Her mother would probably want to kill her, too. Odd, but that last thought didn't bother Judith much at all. She couldn't seem to feel anything toward her mother now. Uncle Tekel had excused his sister's cold attitude toward her only daughter with the lie that Judith was a constant reminder of the man she'd loved and lost.

Lies, so many lies.

"You'd best get some rest, lass."

Judith jumped a foot when Alex's deep voice sounded behind her, and her hand flew to her breast. She took several deep breaths before she answered him. "We must have our supper before we rest. What have you done with the baggage?"

Alex motioned to the opposite side of the clearing. Judith immediately hurried across the area to set out the food. Jane had packed a pretty white cloth at the top of the satchel. She spread that on the hard ground first, then covered it with her offerings. There was thick, crusty black bread, triangles of red and yellowed cheeses, fat strips of salted pork, and fresh, tart green apples.

When everything was ready, she invited the men to join her. Then she waited. After a long moment she realized they didn't have any intention of eating with her. She could feel herself turning red with embarrassment. She sat on the ground, her legs tucked under the hem of her skirts, her hands folded together in her lap. She kept her head bowed so none of them would see her humiliation.

It had been a stupid mistake, offering to share her food with them. She was English, after all, and they probably couldn't stomach the thought of eating a meal with her.

She told herself she had nothing to feel embarrassed about. She wasn't acting like a rude barbarian. They were.

Iain walked back into the clearing and came to a quick stop. One look at Judith told him something was wrong. Her face was flaming red. He turned to look at his men next. Alex and Gowrie sat on the ground on the opposite side of the clearing with their backs resting against tree trunks. Alex was wide awake, but Gowrie looked as though he'd fallen asleep. Brodick, as silent as usual, was already fast asleep. He was so completely wrapped in his plaid, only the top of his white-blond hair was visible.

Iain noticed the mound of food in front of Judith and guessed what had happened. He let out a sigh, then clasped his hands behind his back and walked over to stand next to her. She wouldn't look up at him. As soon as she spotted him coming toward her, she turned her attention to repacking the food. She was stuffing the containers back into her satchel when he sat down across from her.

He picked up one of the apples. She snatched it out of his hand. He snatched it back. She was so surprised by that boldness, she looked up at him. His eyes sparkled with laughter. She couldn't imagine what he found so amusing. She continued to stare at him while he took a bite out of the apple. He leaned forward and offered the apple to her. She took a bite before she realized what she'd done.

Alex suddenly appeared at her side. Without a word he sat down and reached into the satchel. He pulled out all the containers she'd just repacked. After tossing a piece of bread to Iain, Alex popped a triangle of cheese into his mouth.

Then Gowrie joined them. Judith put one of the apples in her lap and shyly explained that she would save it for the sleeping warrior to eat in the morning.

"Brodick must be terribly weary to miss his supper," she remarked.

Alex snorted with amusement. "Brodick's not weary, just stubborn. He won't eat your apple tomorrow either, you being English and all. No, he—"

Judith's frown stopped his explanation. She turned to look at Brodick, judged the distance in her mind, then picked up the apple from her lap. "If you're really certain he won't eat the apple tomorrow, he must want to eat it now."

She had every intention of hurling the apple at the surly Scot, but just as soon as she leaned back to take aim, Iain grabbed hold of her hand.

"You don't want to do that, lass," he said.

He wouldn't let go of her hand. Judith struggled with him for a second or two before giving up. "You're right," she said. "It would be a waste of a perfectly good apple, a superior English apple, I might add, on a mean-tempered

Scot." She paused to shake her head. "I cannot believe he's related to Frances Catherine. You really can let go of my hand now, Iain."

He obviously didn't trust her. He did let go of her hand, but he kept the apple. Judith was too surprised by his sudden smile to argue with him.

"You don't want Brodick for an enemy, Judith," Alex said.

"But he's already my enemy," she replied. She had difficulty taking her gaze off Iain when she answered his friend. "Brodick made up his mind to dislike me even before we met, didn't he?"

No one answered her. Then Gowrie turned the topic. "If you retaliate each time you think someone dislikes you, you'll be throwing apples all day long once we reach the Highlands."

"Superior Scottish apples," Alex teased.

Judith turned to frown at the warrior. "I don't care if I'm liked or not," she said. "Frances Catherine needs me. That's all that really matters. My feelings certainly aren't important."

"Why does she need you?"

Brodick called out that question. Judith was so surprised the man had spoken to her, she turned and smiled at him.

Before she could form an answer, he said, "She has Patrick."

"And all of us," Alex said. "We're her relatives."

She turned around again. "I'm certain she's comforted by such loyalty, but you are men, after all."

Iain raised an eyebrow over that statement. He obviously didn't understand what she was talking about. He wasn't alone in his confusion, either. Gowrie and Alex looked just as puzzled.

"Frances Catherine has relatives who are women, too," Gowrie said.

"I would imagine she does," Judith agreed.

"Then why does she need you?" Gowrie asked. He reached down to take a third helping of the pork strips, but kept his gaze on her while he waited for her answer.

"For the birthing," Iain guessed aloud.

"Then she thinks she's going to have trouble?" Gowrie asked his laird.

Iain nodded. "It appears so."

Alex snorted. Judith took exception to that response. "Frances Catherine has every right to be worried. She isn't a coward, if that's what you're thinking. Why, she's one of the most courageous women I've ever known. She's strong and—"

"Now don't get yourself all worked up," Alex interrupted with a grin. "We are all aware of Frances Catherine's many fine qualities. You don't have to defend her to us."

"Does she think she's going to die?" Gowrie asked. He looked startled, as if he'd only just worked out that possibility in his mind.

Before Judith could answer him, Brodick called out, "If Patrick's woman thinks she's going to die, why did she send for you, English?"

She turned around to glare at the plaid cocoon. Then she turned around again. She decided to ignore the rude man. He could shout a hundred questions at her, but she wasn't going to answer any of them.

Everyone waited a long minute for Judith to explain. She occupied herself by once again gathering up the containers of food to put away.

Brodick's curiosity proved to be greater than his dislike for her. The rude man didn't just join the group, either. Nay, he elbowed his way in next to her, shoving Alex out of his way. She moved over to make room for the big man, but his arm still rubbed against hers when he was finally settled. He didn't recoil away. She looked at Iain to judge his reaction. His expression didn't tell her anything, though. He picked up the apple and tossed it to Brodick. She still refused to look at the warrior, guessing he was still scowling, but she heard him take a loud bite of the offering.

Then Iain winked at her. She smiled back.

"Are you going to make me ask you again, English?" Brodick muttered around a mouthful of apple.

She decided she was. "Ask me what, Brodick?" she asked, trying to sound sincere.

His sigh was fierce enough to knock over the containers. Judith bit her lower lip to keep herself from laughing.

"Are you pricking my temper on purpose?" he asked.

She nodded.

Alex and Gowrie both laughed. Brodick glared. "Just answer my question," he commanded. "If Frances Catherine thinks she's going to die, why in thunder did she send for you?"

"You won't understand."

"Because I'm Scots?"

She let him see her exasperation. "Do you know, I was always told the Scots could be mule-headed. I never believed such nonsense, of course, but now that I've met you, I believe I'll have to rethink my position on that issue."

"Don't get him riled," Alex warned with a chuckle.

"Aye, Brodick gets downright surly when he isn't in a good mood," Gowrie told her.

Her eyes widened. "Do you mean to say he's happy now?"

Both Gowrie and Alex nodded at the same time. Judith burst into laughter. She was certain they were jesting with her.

They were just as certain she'd lost her mind.

"We're all curious as to why Frances Catherine sent for you," Alex said once she'd controlled herself.

She nodded. "Since you don't know me at all well, I'll have to confess to a few of my considerable flaws so you'll understand. I'm extremely stubborn, arrogant too, though in truth I have absolutely nothing to be arrogant about. I'm sinfully possessive... did I mention that flaw?"

Everyone but Iain shook his head at her. Judith stared at their leader, though. His eyes had taken on such a warm glint. It was a little unnerving to have such a handsome man give her his full attention. She had to force herself to turn her gaze away so she could concentrate on what she was saying.

She stared at her lap. "Well, I am possessive," she whispered. "Frances Catherine is well aware of my many imperfections, too. 'Tis the truth she's counting on them."

"Why?" Brodick asked.

"Because she thinks she's going to die," Judith explained. She let out a little sigh before adding, "And I'm too stubborn to let her."

